

## **Understanding Accreditation**

University accreditation and quality assurance measures vary from country to country. Most commonly, universities are granted the right to issue degrees, with procedures put in place to measure the level of quality of instruction to ensure that it is maintained at a level acceptable to the body that issues the degree-granting right.

These procedures can vary from instances of universities being self-accrediting through to agencies such as the British Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education publishing assessment results for comparative purposes.

### **Accreditation in the USA**

Accreditation is a status granted to an educational institution or a program that has been found to meet or exceed stated criteria of educational quality. In the United States accreditation is voluntarily sought by institutions and programs, and is conferred by non-governmental bodies.

Accreditation has two fundamental purposes: to assure the quality of the institution or program, and to assist in the improvement of the institution or program. Accreditation, which applies to institutions or programs, is to be distinguished from certification and licensure which apply to individuals.

American universities are authorized at state level, however universities holding what is known as "Regional Accreditation" are given exemption from meeting the requirements of each state in which they operate. The US federal government's Department of Education (DoEd) also recognizes those universities holding Regional Accreditation as being eligible for federal student financial assistance. This is also true of courses that meet the criteria of professional accrediting bodies, and of those institutions/organizations holding accreditation of the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education Training Council (DETC).

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) recognizes the following regional accrediting bodies for colleges and universities in the United States; it is these bodies that confer "Regional Accreditation":

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
- Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

Institutes that do not have such accreditation can exist legally by meeting the state requirements, and are known as "state licensed" or "state approved" universities. States also exempt institutes with a religious charter that offer theological degree programs.

American universities holding Regional Accreditation will normally only accept students or faculty from similarly accredited universities, or holding qualifications from US DoEd-recognized accrediting bodies. DETC-accredited qualifications can also be acceptable, but this may vary program by program.

Many, if not most, professional bodies and states will only allow licenses to practice a profession to those holding qualifications from universities that are accredited by recognized accrediting bodies. This is due to the existence of un-recognized (by the US DoEd) accrediting bodies, which can in some cases give rise to misleading statements or even fraudulent activities.

So, in the US environment, your choice is between:

- (i) an institute or course with accreditation recognized by the US DoEd (i.e. the six regional bodies and the Accrediting Commission of the DETC)
- (ii) a state-licensed or state-approved (as in California) university meeting state requirements but not holding recognized accreditation
- (iii) a university with a religious exemption from state licensing
- (iv) an institute/organization with other than the above.

Selection of an American program must be made carefully by the prospective student, depending on the use to which the earned qualification will be put. In general terms, a degree from a university with DoEd recognized accreditation will be the wisest choice in terms of acceptability and transferability.

### **Benefits of Accreditation**

Accreditation eases the transition of students as they move from one accredited school to another. The regional nature of accreditation allows a receiving school in the same or another state to assess the quality of a sending school and accept the incoming student's credits and academic record. This ease of transfer applies across the nation through reciprocal agreements between the regional accrediting agencies.

Students also benefit through eligibility to apply for federal grants or scholarships, or to seek admission to colleges, technical schools or military programs that require students to come from regionally accredited schools.

Accreditation assures the general public that accredited schools are focused on student achievement, and on providing an efficient, effective and enriching learning environment. Accreditation extends across state lines, assuring students, parents and the public that a given school adheres to high quality standards based on the latest research and successful professional practice.

Educators gain access to a network of schools within their region for the sharing of best practices and professional knowledge. Through the accreditation process educators at all levels can achieve deserved recognition for demonstrating their ongoing commitment to quality, and to the success for their students.

## **American State-Licensed Universities**

Many students find that US state-licensed/approved programs can meet their objectives, since costs are low in comparison, programs are highly accessible (usually with no residency requirements) and courses tend to be vocationally-biased towards "degree completion" for adults, including credits for work experience.

### **'Diploma Mills'**

A diploma mill (or degree mill) is often defined as an illegal institution that grants bogus degrees in exchange for money, and without requiring the student to show proof of course mastery, or to do any substantive coursework or testing.

Diploma mills should be reported to the appropriate authorities (such as a local government education agency). They not only do great harm to their "graduates", and to society in general, but also give legitimate alternative and non-traditional education a bad name. With the advent of the Internet, diploma mills have been appearing more frequently.

An inferior school operating just inside the law can also be a poor choice, since although the institute may not be a diploma mill according to the above definition, the degree awarded may not be held in high regard.

*<http://www.collegedegreeguide.com/articles-fr/accredit.htm#top>*